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Mike Higton, *Christian Doctrine* (SCM Core Text), SCM Press, London 2008, xi + 413 pp., £22.99 (ISBN 9780334040194); John Webster, Kathryn Tanner & Iain Torrance (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, xii + 708 pp., £85.00 (ISBN 9780190245765).

It is a huge challenge to give a comprehensive account of all major issues that cover the field of contemporary Christian systematic theology in a single volume. It is even more challenging to do so on one's own, in a coherent way and using an accessible style. And yet, Mike Higton, senior lecturer in Theology at the University of Exeter, has done precisely that. His *Christian Doctrine* is printed on a cheap sort of paper—but presumably that is its most conspicuous weakness (and of course the publisher is to blame for this rather than the author). Addressing especially undergraduate students, Higton offers a superb survey of Christian theology's doctrinal claims, its tasks, traditions, sources, and main issues of contention. Of course the best way to introduce systematic theology is by undertaking it, so that is what Higton does: rather than rehearsing a static overview, he tries to make sense of the various doctrinal topics by showing what they may mean for us today and how they fit in with the overall Christian narrative. However, whereas many systematic theologians are inclined to give too much space to their own cherished ideas and constructions when introducing students to the main contours of Christian doctrine, Higton is modest enough to pause at the right moment to stimulate his readers to make a reasoned choice for themselves, offering at most a suggestion as to how a particular conundrum might be adequately handled.

Christian Doctrine is divided into two parts. The first, "Life in God", discusses Christian talk about God, the incarnation of the Son, and the sending of the Spirit—the core issues of Trinitarian theology. The second part, "Life in the World", looks at the doctrines of creation and providence, eschatology, the problem of suffering, sin and salvation, election and rejection, ecclesiology (two chapters, including the sacraments) and the Bible (also two chapters, one covering the doctrine of revelation). This fairly traditional list of *loci*, however, may be too dry to give a good impression of the sheer creativity and great passion with which all of these themes are introduced and discussed. Nor does it do justice to the author's discernment as to what is at stake in the various doctrines, or to his distinctive sense of humor (which, incidentally, nowhere detracts from the seriousness of his treatment). Higton's approach is never speculative or theoretical, but always engaging, spiritual and practical, i.e., directed at leading a Christian life. Furthermore, the book is distinguished by a strong biblical orientation, with nearly every chapter containing one or two extended readings of key biblical passages. And to mention one further strength: the didactic arrangement of the book is quite exemplary. Higton is evidently an excellent teacher, and the fragrance of his classroom explanations and his discussions with students is never far away. He punctuates the ongoing text with succinct summaries ("Key points"), preparatory questions and exercises, reasoned suggestions for further reading for those who are interested in a particular topic, and separate textboxes with quotations from significant theologians or just sideways glances. One might argue that in splitting up his text like this, Higton gives in too much to a postmodern fondness for quickly changing fragmentary glimpses, but I think this may well be the way it should be done in a present-day introductory work.

Moreover, Higton makes all kinds of connections with the worlds of higher and lower culture—art (some pages with pictures are included), literature, film, the Internet—thus connecting theological thinking with important parts of the students' everyday world.

Higton gives voice to his personal theological stance in two ways. First, describing himself as a "convinced Trinitarian Christian," he offers a sustained Trinitarian interpretation of the heart of the Christian story. Time and again, we are reminded of what he considers to be the focal meaning of Christian doctrine, and virtually every chapter is situated at its proper place within this core narrative: the story that believers are being drawn by the Spirit into conformity to Christ on their way to the Father. Second, from time to time Higton relates his doctrinal expositions to his personal biography (e.g., when he connects his view on 'baptism in the Spirit' to his faith experiences in the charismatic evangelical Anglican parish in which he was raised). Similarly, he seems to owe his strong biblical orientation to his parents, who always ask him how the things he says as a theologian relate to the Bible (x). Someone with whom I discussed the book felt its personal tone was loquacious—but I disagree. Higton's self-involvement is always highly functional.

Are there no drawbacks at all then? Of course, depending on one's own theological position, there is always something which a reader would rather have seen presented differently. I think that Higton, no doubt drawing here on Hans Frei and the Yale school, is too reticent about the propositional content of Christian belief claims. Further, his participatory theology lends (as he himself realizes, 293) a universalist—and thereby optimistic, I would add—flavor to much of what he writes. The love of God is made so central throughout the book that one wonders how this relates to the Bible's frequent talk of God's wrath and judgment (though I must add that the question of "who will be saved" is pursued with great seriousness). Moreover, the book's historical orientation appears at times arbitrary and fragmentary. To give an example that may be of special interest to the Reformed community, in the chapter on election so much attention is devoted to a (by the way fascinating) interpretation of Romans 9-11 that apparently no space was left for charting the positions of, say, Augustine, Calvin, Arminius, the supra- and infralapsarians or any other historical voice apart from that of Karl Barth.

Still, I feel little inclination to quarrel with such issues since Higton has put us greatly in his debt with this sensitive and gripping articulation of the Christian faith. His lively and engaging style contributes to the fact that the reader feels involved without being patronized. In short, much can be learned from this book, and not only by undergraduates.

The same is true of the Oxford handbook of systematic theology—a work composed by "an international team of authors" (back cover). The qualification 'international' should not be pushed too far, however: 26 of the 39 contributors come from the USA, 11 from the UK, one from Canada and one from Germany. So, yes, it is international, but one may doubt whether this selection of theologians exhibits a keen eye on the various places in the world where high-level Christian systematic theology is being practised, rather than just a narrow Anglo-Saxon preference.

The text is divided into four parts, only one of which (called "Doctrine" and covering 300 of the 700 pages) discusses the traditional range of dogmatic loci. The second part is on systematic theology's "Sources," including sections on revelation, Scripture, tradition,

reason, experience, and, interestingly, worship. Next, systematic theology is located in its various contexts by means of a couple of essays under the rubric of "Conversations." In this third section, relations are sketched between systematic theology and a number of other disciplines, such as biblical studies, moral theology, history, hermeneutics, philosophy, cultural theory, natural science and the arts. The final section, "Prospects," evaluates the vitality and resilience of various contemporary theological movements (postmodern theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, revisionist theology and others).

Remarkably, the editors nowhere explain the reasons behind this four-part arrangement, but it seems to me that it has both advantages and disadvantages. A disadvantage is that there is only limited space for discussion of the principal domains of the field of systematic theology. For example, the section on the Holy Spirit covers only 11 pages. This far too brief exposition allows only for the most shallow discussion of the main themes and trajectories of contemporary pneumatology. An advantage of the three additional parts, however, is that the discipline of systematic theology is placed within various contexts in often insightful and perceptive ways. Many interesting connections with other disciplines, as well as new avenues in theological research, are presented. For example, there is a fascinating essay by John Webster on what he aptly coins "theologies of retrieval", subsuming under this heading such widely divergent theologies as those of Jüngel, de Lubac, T.F. Torrance and John Milbank, and showing that in a crucial way these theologies are driven by a common goal: the revitalization of theology by restoring its connection with its proper sources, following the disarray caused by modernity.

So in a sense the book offers less than one would have expected. To mention another example, the discussion of Christology is restricted to a short chapter on the incarnation! Although this happens to be a very informative and thorough-going piece, surely there is more to Christology than the incarnation—for example the dogmatic significance of the life and preaching of Jesus. On the other hand, the book offers more than expected, especially by inviting the reader to think about fruitful directions in which systematic theology might develop in the near future. Many contributors have complied with the editors' request not only to describe the 'state-of-the-art,' but also to make judgments about the way in which inquiry in their topic might be most fruitfully pursued (xii). Perhaps this feature, more than anything, makes this book a highly valuable tool for anyone who feels committed to systematic theology—that is, to the ongoing task of articulating the meaning and significance of the Christian message in intellectually convincing ways.

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